Awaiting the Mahdî: Covenant or Creed?

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INTRODUCTION

A friend had written to me a while back asking about the Mahdî and my assessment of what is presently being circulated on the Internet regarding his appearance, the signs foretelling his arrival, and the dreams that people have about him. He also urged me to deal with the particulars of this topic.

I responded to this brother that what is being circulated about the Mahdî is baseless and has no bearing on reality whatsoever. These reports amount to nothing more than rumors and wishful thinking on the part of those who have fallen into despair.

I promised him that I would deal with this topic, since it pertains to an ordeal that the Muslim nation has to undergo. In order to approach this topic – that of awaiting the Mahdî – I first embarked upon a study of how the verb "to wait" is used in the Qur'ân.

I believe that referring back to the Qur'ân is a sensible approach, since it is the book that contains guidance and light for all such matters whenever and however they occur. I looked at every verse of the Qur'ân that contained the term "to wait" or any of its synonyms and found that these verses can be classified into three categories:

The first category: verses that threaten the unbelievers by telling them to await their punishment in the Hereafter.

The Prophet (peace be upon him) would tell the unbelievers to wait until their punishment arrives, as is mentioned in the following verses of the Qur'ân:

"They say: 'When will this decision be, if you are telling the truth?' Say (O Muhammad): 'On the Day of Decision, no profit will it be to the unbelievers if they then believe, nor will they be granted a respite.' So turn away from them and wait. They too are waiting." [*Sûrah al-Sajdah*: 28-30]

The "Day of Decision" is – and Allah knows best – the Day of Resurrection, since it is described as a day that "no profit will it be to the unbelievers if they then believe, nor will they be granted a respite". The Prophet (Peace be upon him) is commanded to wait. What he must wait for is the final outcome and the fulfillment of the promised resurrection, judgment, and recompense that also awaits the unbelievers.

A similar verse is: "On the day that certain signs of your Lord appear, no good will it do a soul to believe in them if they believed not before or earned righteousness through faith." [*Sûrah al-An`âm*: 158]

It would be correct to understand that the sign referred to here is the Sun rising in the West, for on that day, faith will be of no benefit for a person who had not believed from before.

It may also be correct to say that what is meant here is a certain type of sign from Allah and for this reason, the verse refers to "certain signs of your Lord". There are other signs of Allah; for example, the throes of death, since Allah accepts the repentance of a person before they are overtaken by the throes of death, but not afterwards.

Therefore, they await the Great Hour. After its signs appear, like the Sun rising in the West, a person will not benefit by embracing the faith. They might also be awaiting the lesser Hour which is death, for when a person dies, his day has come. The signs of this day are the throes of death and the sight of the angels who come to take away his soul. At that point in time, it is to no avail for that person to start believing. This is why the verse calls to works, faith, and reform before the coming of the end – regardless of which end it is – when these things will no longer be possible. When Allah says: "…no good will it do a soul to believe in them if they believed not before or earned righteousness through faith" He is referring to that specific time and encouraging people to earn good through faith and works before it is too late.

The meaning of "waiting" here is not to place your cheek in your hand and wait for something to happen. The meaning here is to strive and try to get ahead of something that you dread is going to happen.

The second category: verses that threaten the unbelievers to await their punishment in this world.

Sometimes, the unbelievers seek to hurry on the punishment as a way of expressing their skepticism about it and lack of concern for it. This can be seen in the story of Prophet Hûd (peace be upon him) and his people: "They (Hud's people) said: 'Do you come to us that we should worship Allah alone and give up what our fathers used to worship. Bring us what you threaten us with if you are telling the truth'. He said: 'Punishment and wrath have already come upon you from your Lord. Do you dispute with me over names that you have made up, you and your fathers, without any authority from Allah. Then wait. I am amongst you, also waiting'." [*Sûrah al-A`râf*: 70-71]

Those people asked for punishment, requesting it to be hastened upon them, and they were commanded to wait.

The same situation can be seen in the following verse about the people of Yûnûs (Jonah, peace be upon him): "Are they waiting for anything except for the days that befell those who passed away before them? Say: 'Then wait. I am amongst you, also waiting'." [*Sûrah Yûnus*: 102]

The “days that befell those who passed away” refers to the punishments and hardships that had descended upon them in this world.

Also: “Say to those who do not believe: ‘Act according to your own way, and we shall act in our way. And wait! We too shall be waiting’.” [*Sûrah Hûd*: 121-122]

Look at how waiting and acting are placed together. The disbelievers are given the following challenge: “Act according to your own way, and we shall act in our way and await what Allah will decree between us.”

Allah says elsewhere: “Be patient until Allah decides between us, for He is the best to decide.” [*Sûrah al-A`râf*: 87]

He says: “Say (O Muhammad): ‘Wait, for verily I will wait with you’.” [*Sûrah al-Tûr*: 31]

This is the wait for Allah’s punishment to descend upon the unbelievers in this world.

The third category: verses that refer to waiting for a sign from Allah.

The unbelievers used to demand the Prophet (peace be upon him) to bring them a sign from Allah. They wanted Mount Safâ to be turned into gold for them or have a piece of the sky fall upon them among other miracles. Allah’s Messenger (peace be upon him) would say to them what Allah ordered him to say: “The Unseen is only for Allah to know.”

This comes in the Qur’ân: “They say: ‘Why is not a sign sent down to him from his Lord?’ Say (O Muhammad): ‘The Unseen is only for Allah to know. So wait. I too will be waiting with you’.” [*Sûrah Yûnus*: 20]

There are important lessons to be learned from these three types of verses:

1. Matters of the Unseen must be left to Allah. This is why He said: “The Unseen is only for Allah to know.” The descent of Allah’s wrath and the Day of Resurrection are matters of the Unseen that Allah does not reveal to anyone.

Allah says: “Verily the Hour is coming. My design is to keep it hidden for every soul to receive its reward by the measure of its endeavor.” [*Sûrah TâHâ*:15]

The Unseen is Allah’s domain. He reveals it to no one “except a Messenger whom He has chosen.” [*Sûrah al-Jinn*: 27]

There are some matters of the Unseen that He does not even reveal to the angels and Messengers. Allah keeps them completely to Himself. No one is allowed to delve into these matters in any way. A person might sometimes find within himself an inspired thought or feeling and construe it to be something, but he must never believe it with

conviction. He might have a vision of something good for the Muslims or something horrible for the unbelievers, but it remains a mere speculation nonetheless.

We see this to be the case even with the Prophet Joseph (peace be upon him). Allah says: "And he (Joseph) said to the one who he thought was about to be saved…" [*Sûrah Yûsuf*: 42]

Though he was a prophet who received revelation from Allah, he did not speak with certitude about his interpretation of the dream, but only conjectured.

Likewise, when a man came to Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and told him about a dream that he had. Abû Bakr interpreted it and then asked: "O Messenger of Allah, I swear that you are as my father. Did I get it right or wrong?"

Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) replied: "You were right in some of it and wrong in some."

Abû Bakr said: "I swear by Allah, inform me of what I got wrong."

Allah's Messenger replied: "Do not swear." [*Sahîh al-Bukhârî* (7046) and Sahîh *Muslim* (2269)]

Expectations, possibilities, speculations, and hopes have a wide scope but do not offer a person certainty of any kind when it comes to the Unseen. This is because what they are waiting for is something that will only occur in the future. Allah says: "The Unseen is only for Allah to know." [*Sûrah Yûnus*: 20]

2. Allah has given no human being, not even the Prophets, any involvement in His punishments that await His servants. This is why Allah addresses His Messenger Muhammad (peace be upon him) in the following manner: "You have nothing to do with the matter. Whether he turns to them in mercy or punishes them, for they are indeed the wrongdoers." [*Sûrah Al `Imrân*: 128]

"Whether We show you some part of what We promised them or We take up your soul before that, to Us is their return" [*Sûrah Yûnus*: 46]

These verses point to the fact that these matters are the affairs of Allah alone. People must submit and accept the decree of Allah as well as His will and His command. People must not delve into matters that do not concern them. These verses indicate that those people who ask for signs should be informed that such things are purely Allah's concern and He does not share them with any of His creatures.

3. We are encouraged to work and to set things right and hurry in our efforts before the end overtakes us, whether that end be death or the Day of Resurrection. We are not supposed to just wait. We are supposed to engage in diligent, fruitful work. We must base

our work on both the causes established by Islamic teachings as well as the natural causes set forth by Allah in His Creation.

We find no text in the Qur'ân or in the Sunnah of Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) that places us in a state of waiting and anticipation, not even for the Hour itself. Every believer must believe in the Hour and know that it is coming. Nevertheless, we are not supposed to wait in anticipation for it or seek to hurry it on.

Anas b. Mâlik relates that the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "If the Hour arrives and one of you is holding a date palm sapling, then he should go ahead and plant it before getting up from his place if he is able to." [*Musnad Ahmad* (12981)]

Note that he did not say: "..and if one of you is praying he should complete his prayer" but mentioned a worldly matter "…if one of you is holding a date palm sapling…" and still said that he should not to get up from what he was doing. Worldly work is blessed if it is performed with a noble intention, even more so if it brings good to others, like assisting the downtrodden and weak or being kind and compassionate to children or giving to the needy and hungry. How much more a person's work will be blessed and rewarded if it is for the good of the religion? What if a person guides someone who is astray or in unbelief or deviance? What if he teaches another Muslim who is ignorant of his religion, or reconciles between Muslims who are divided or reforms a sinner?

There are even some variations of this hadîth that read: "If you hear the Antichrist and you are holding a date palm sapling…" [al-Bukhârî, *al-Adab al-Mufrid* (480)]

Some people live in expectation of these events, and this inspires within them a kind of laziness and lethargy that produces only silence and languid inactivity.

The issue at hand is that of diligent and earnest work. The value of work is one of the most important values that Islam advances and inculcates in the hearts of the believers.

There is an event related in the hadîth that has great bearing on what we are discussing. Yasîr b. Jâbir relates that a red wind stirred up in al-Kûfah. A man came who had nothing better to say than: 'O `Abd Allah b. Mas`ûd, the Hour has arrived."

`Abd Allah b. Mas`ûd, who had been reclining sat up straight. This was a sign of his concern, but it could also have been an indication of his anger and disapproval. He said: "The Hour will not arrive until inheritance stops being divided and receiving war spoils is not a cause of happiness." Then he made an indication with his hand towards Syria and mentioned some of the major signs that must come to pass right before the Hour. [*Sahîh Muslim* (2899)]

Ibn Mas`ûd condemned that other man's hasty conclusions and bad estimation of events. This is because Ibn Mas`ûd was erudite and sharp and had acquired his knowledge directly from Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him). He made it clear that the Hour

would not arrive until the signs occurred that Allah’s Messenger (peace be upon him) had informed us about.

CHAPTER ONE
What is Related about the Mahdî

There are many hadîth about the Mahdî, possibly more than one hundred. Some of them are fabricated, some weak, others good. There may even be some hadîth that can be graded as authentic, but they are very few.

One hadîth is from `Alî b. `Abî Tâlib that the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: “The Mahdî is one of us, from our household. Allah will prepare him in one night.” [*Musnad Ahmad* (645) and *Sunan Ibn Mâjah* (4085).] Some scholars have graded it as a good (hasan) hadîth, but its chain of narrators is weak, since it contains Yâsîn b. Shaybân al-`Ijlî. Al-Bukhârî declares him questionable, which, coming from him, is a statement of disapproval. Abû Zur`ah and Ibn Ma`în say there is nothing wrong with him.

There are three hadîth about the Mahdî related on the authority of Abû Sa`îd al-Khudrî. All of them have been related by al-Hâkim. Some of them have also been related by Abû Dâwûd, al-Tirmidhî, Ibn Mâjah, Ahmad, and others.

One of these is: “The Mahdî will come forth from the last generations of my nation.” [*Mustadrak al-Hâkim* (8716).] Al-Hâkim declares it authentic, and al-Dhahabî concurs. There is some disagreement about its chain of narrators.

Another is: “The Mahdî is from my descendants. He will have a prominent forehead and a hooked nose. He will fill the world with equity and justice just as it had been filled with tyranny and oppression. He will reign for seven years.” [*Sunan Abî Dâwûd* (4285)]

Then there is the hadîth related on the authority of Thawbân that the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: “If you see the black banners coming from the direction of Khurasân, then go to them, even if you have to crawl, because among them will be Allah’s Caliph the Mahdî.” [*Mustadrak al-Hâkim* (8572) and *Musnad Ahmad* (22387).] All the chains of transmission for this hadîth are weak and inauthentic, though some people have been overly lenient about it and declared it authentic by virtue of the many chains of transmission that it has.

Some people have used this hadîth to support their claim that the Mahdî is from the family of al-Abbâs and that the Mahdî is from of the Abbasid dynasty. There were Abbasid Caliphs who went by the name al-Mahdî. For this reason, we see Ibn Hazm, a supporter of the rival Umayyad house, offer the following words in verse:

Since the banners have started to appear black, it has become clear
To the people of guidance that those have no way of attaining sense.

The banners of the Abbasid State were black. It is not hard to see how this weak hadîth might have been fabricated or at least tampered with to support the Abbasid cause.

Umm Salamah relates that the Prophet said: "The Mahdî will be from my descendants from the line of Fâtimah." [Sunan Abî Dâwûd (4086).] It has a weak chain of transnmission containing `Alî b. Nufayl who is found in al-`Uqaylî's book on weak narrators. Al-`Uqayli says: "None of his hadîth on the Mahdî should be accepted. He is the only narrator known to relate them, and all of these narrations were passed on from him by Ziyâd b. Bayân." Al-Bukhârî mentions this hadîth of his, then says: "Its chain of transmission is questionable." On this basis, al-Mundhirî opines that these are actually the words of Sa`îd b. al-Musayyib.

There are many hadîth that give an established meaning when taken together, though most of them do not make the grade of authenticity when taken on their own. It may be the case that only one hadîth out of all of them can actually be considered authentic. The hadîth that can be graded as good are very few. The vast majority of these hadîth are weak.

Many scholars have written on the topic of the Mahdî. One of these was Na`îm b. Hamâd who wrote on this matter in his book al-Fitan. Though a leading scholar of the Sunnah, nevertheless Hamâd used to make many errors. Al-Daraqutnî, al-Dhahabî, and Ibn Hajar have all made note of this. Maslamah b. al-Qâsim went so far as to say: "He relates many hadîth on battles that are to be rejected. He is the only person to relate them."

Abu Nu`aym al-Isfahânî's book on the subject entitled `Aqd al-Durur has been published. Ibn Kathîr, al-Suyutî, al-Sakhâwî, al-San`ânî, and al-Shawkânî, among others have written on it, not to mention a number of contemporary authors. Ibn Khaldûn, in his Muqaddimah, writes: "The popularly accepted view among Muslims is that the Mahdî is real. There is no doubt that this is the correct view, for the vast majority of the leading scholars and people of knowledge acknowledge the hadîth about the Mahdî as a whole, even though few of the individual hadîth about him are free of criticism. There are even scholars who have declared the hadîth about him to be mutawâtir, especially among the later scholars. There are others, however, who have rejected outright all the hadîth pertaining to the Mahdî."

[Note: A hadîth is considered mutawâtir if it has been narrated by such a large number of people that it is a practical impossibility for them to have conspired on a lie.]

Such outright rejection has been attributed to Mujâhid, as well as the claim the Mahdî is none other than the Messiah, the son of Mary. This comes in a hadîth: "The Mahdî is none other than the Messiah, the son of Mary." [Sunan Ibn Mâjah (4039) and al-Hâkim (8412). It is weak.] This same opinion has been attributed to al-Hasan al-Basrî. Ibn Khaldûn is one of those who has dismissed and rejected this opinion as has Muhammad Rashîd Ridâ, Sheikh `Abd Allah b. Zayd Al Mahmûd, and Muhammad Muhyî al-Dîn `Abd Al-Hamîd as well as others in recent years.

In summary, we can say that there are a lot of hadîth about the Mahdî to be found in the Sunnah of varying quality, running the gamut between fabricated, weak, and good. Hadîth graded as authentic are few. However, belief in the appearance of the Mahdî is an established matter, taking all of the evidence together.

CHAPTER TWO
The Mahdî in Sunnî and Shî`Ah Traditions

Ahl al-Sunnah believe that a man from the household of the Prophet (peace be upon him) will appear at the end of time in a very natural manner, born like any other person is born. He will live just as others live. He may even fall into error and need people to correct him just like anybody else. Then Allah will decree a lot of good for the Muslims to come at his hands, as well as piety, justice, and virtue. Allah will unite the Muslims around him. There is nothing more to it than this. This is what is found in the hadîth.

There is no textual evidence telling us that it is an act of piety to wait for him or to anticipate his coming. It is not appropriate for any Muslim to accept such a claim on the basis of mere supposition. A claim must be backed up by sufficient evidence. Those making claims are many. This has been the case since the dawn of history, as I will soon make clear. A Muslim is expected to examine matters, verify them, and approach them with caution. A Muslim must never be hasty and accept matters on the basis of personal desires or wishful thinking.

Likewise, no aspect of Islamic Law is dependent on the appearance of the Mahdî. Claims that such Islamic institutions as the Friday prayer, congregational prayers, jihâd, carrying out the prescribed punishments, or applying the laws of Islam are contingent on his appearance are baseless. Muslims must conduct their lives as normal. They must perform their acts of worship, fulfill their duties, engage in jihâd, reform their societies, learn their religion, and teach each other. When this pious man does appear and his identity is established with unambiguous, indisputable proofs, then we should follow him. This was the attitude of the Companions and those that followed them. The scholars throughout the ages have adhered to this view. The idea that the Mahdî should be awaited and anticipated and the excessive emphasis placed on him was a much later development.

The Mahdî in Shî`ah traditions:

Belief in the Mahdî is a fundamental article of faith for the Shî`ah. Their belief system is founded upon it. The different Shî`ah sects disagree on many things, but they all agree on the idea of the "Hidden Imâm." They mean by it al-Imâm al-Mahdî, though they disagree about who this Mahdî is.

This whole concept originated in the claim that the Prophet (peace be upon him) had not died and shall return. The first person to advance this claim was the Jew `Abd Allah b. Saba'. He said: "How strange are those people who claim that Jesus (peace be upon him)

will return but reject the idea that Muhammad (peace be upon him) will return, and he is more deserving of a second coming than Jesus!"

This fanciful idea had a malicious intent behind it. The man who proposed it wanted to corrupt a central tenet of Islam, the belief in the finality of prophethood. This is the belief that Allah had made Muhammad (peace be upon him) the last in the line of Prophets.

Allah says: "Muhammad is not the father of any of your men, but he is the Messenger of Allah and the Seal of the Prophets." [*Sûrah al-Ahzâb*: 40]

The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "I am the Seal of the Prophets. No Prophet will come after me." [*Sunan al-Tirmidhî* (2219) and *Sunan Abî Dâwûd* (4252)]

This is an indisputable tenet of faith in Islam. For this reason, Muslims – whether laymen, scholars, or leaders – unanimously declare as unbelievers anyone who claims that there is a prophet after Muhammad (peace be upon him). This is why the Islamic courts have declared the Qâdiyânî and Bahâ'î sects as outside the fold of Islam and their adherents as unbelievers. This is because they claim some of their leaders to be prophets after Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), like Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (in the case of the Qâdiyânîs) and others. These people fall into unbelief because they violate an indisputable tenet of the faith.

`Abd Allah b. Saba' attempted to sneak this idea into Islam through the back door by claiming that the Prophet (peace be upon him) will return from the grave. He did not say that there was going to be another Prophet, but this was just the beginning, for once the people, or at least a group of them, bought into this idea and began waiting expectantly for the Messenger's return (peace be upon him), the matter became simple. Anyone could come forward and claim that he was the Prophet (peace be upon him) returned from the grave and not some other person claiming prophethood for himself. This was the danger of such an idea.

Such a claim to prophethood violates the beliefs of all the Muslims. It violates Islamic Law. It runs contrary to the consensus of the Companions, the Successors and the early scholars. A person who makes such a claim must fall in one of two categories:

1. The person might be insane. This person should receive psychiatric help.

2. The person is rational.

Every attempt should be made to make this person understand and to convince him of the truth. If he persists in his claim, then his case must be brought before the courts. In this way, the Qâdiyânîs of Pakistan and other groups have been declared unbelievers in the most unambiguous terms, so that the public would have no misunderstanding on the matter.

`Abd Allah b. Saba' also made the claim that `Alî b. Abî Tâlib was the Mahdî. He used to say: "If you brought me his brain in seventy parcels, I would not believe that he has died."

He claimed that `Alî would return and fill the Earth with justice just as it was filled with iniquity. This claim subsequently transferred to Muhammad b. al-Hanafiyyah, who was the son of `Alî b. Abî Tâlib. One of the people who claimed that Muhammad b. al-Hanafiyyah was the Mahdî was a man from Iraq named al-Mukhtâr b. Abî `Ubayd who used to claim that angels visited him. When the Companion Ibn `Umar was informed of al-Mukhtâr b. Abî `Ubayd's claim to receive revelation, he said: "He is telling the truth, for Allah says: 'The devils inspire their helpers…' "

Ibn `Umar showed him no courtesy, in spite of the fact that he was married to Safiyyah bint Abî `Ubayd, al-Mukhtâr's sister.

The sect that claimed that Muhammad b. al-Hanafiyyah was the Mahdî was known as the Kîsâniyyah. One of their members was the famous poet Kathîr `Azzah, who wrote:

Nay, for the Imâms are from Quraysh,
The leaders in truth, four of them peers.

`Alî and three from his household.
They are the grandsons, of whom there is no ambiguity.

One of them is the grandson of faith and righteousness.
Another was taken away at Karbalâ'

The other will not taste death until
He leads the calvary carrying the banner.

He is hidden and unseen in our times,
In Radwâ, he enjoys honey and water.

In another poem he writes:

Nay, say to the guardian, my soul has ransomed you.
You have waited too long in the mountain.

You have harmed the people who are loyal to you,
And who call you Caliph and Imam.

In you, the people of the Earth have again become one.
You have kept away from them for sixty years.

Ibn Khawlah has not tasted death
Nor bequeathed his bones to the Earth.

He has his sustenance every day,
And drink following his food.

When Muhammad b. `Abd Allah b. Hasan rose against Abî Ja`far al-Mansûr, he acquired the title of Mahdî, hoping to be the one foretold in the hadîth. Then his army was routed and he was killed in the year 145 A.H. His head was severed and paraded from Madinah to Iraq. In spite of this, his followers split into three camps. There were those who admitted to his death and discarded the notion that he was the Mahdî. Then there were those who claimed that he would return, even though it was made to appear that he had died. A third group decided that the Mahdî was someone else.

The strange thing is that this situation has repeated itself throughout history. When the recent events happened in the Haram in Mecca, some of those who claimed that their leader was actually the Mahdî were so filled with the idea that, after he was killed, they claimed that he did not die but had escaped and fled. A person is often willing to deny the evidence of his own senses because of some notion that has enthralled him. He cannot bring himself to admit that he was mistaken or deceived or that the idea he held so dear was false.

The Mahdî, for the Shî`ah, moved from person to person each time someone they vested their hopes in proved to be false. After Muhammad b. al-Hanafiyyah, some of them began to look towards Muhammad b. Ja`far, known as Ja`far al-Sâdiq. After he died, some turned to Ismâ`îl b. Ja`far. These people are known as the Ismâ`îliyyah, a sect of the Bâtiniyyah. After he died without leaving a son, some others began awaiting Muhammad b. Ismâ`il. These people belong to another sect of the Bâtiniyyah known as the Qarâmitah. The most famous Shî`ah sect is the Ithnâ `Ashariyyah (the Twelvers). They recognize twelve Imams, the last one being Muhammad b. al-Hasan al-`Askarî, the Mahdî. To them, he is an infallible Imam who went into occultation in a subterranean cave over 1200 years ago. The truth is that his alleged father, Muhammad al-`Askarî, died without having sired any children. For this reason the following verses were penned:

Never did happen the birth of the one in the cavern
Who you spoke to in your ignorance. It did not happen!

Your intellects have fallen into disrepair. To the griffon and goblin you have added a third! As for the Abbasid Mahdî, he was named Muhammad by his father, the Caliph Abû Ja`far al-Mansûr. He then gave him the title of Mahdî because he was combating the problem of the alleged Mahdî from the Ahl al-Bayt. He was compelled to fight fire with fire. In his private assemblies, he used to say: "By Allah, neither the Mahdî of Ahl al-Bayt nor my son is really the Mahdî. We are just fighting them with the same thing that they are throwing at us." Thus, the sun of Abû Ja`far al-Mansûr claimed to be the Mahdî out of his rivalry with another claimant known as the "Pure Heart."

There have been many "Mahdîs" throughout history. There was the Mahdî Ibn Tûmart in Morocco who established the Almohad Caliphate. Then there was the Mahdî of the

Sudan, Muhammad – or Ahmad – b. `Abd Allah who established the Mahdist Movement, which still exists as a political party in that country. He used to say that he was from the Prophet's household (Ahl al-Bayt) and claimed to receive revelation. He also claimed that Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) spoke to him in person and told him that he was the Mahdî. Many people rallied around him. Admittedly, some good came out of the movement, for it played a role in freeing the Sudan from colonial occupation.

There have been a number of "Mahdîs" who never rose to any prominence. Ibn Taymiyah writes: "I know of more than one sheikh in our times known for piety, asceticism, and devotion, each of whom thinks he is the Mahdî. Some of them might possibly be inspired with this notion while they are awake, but they are hearing it from demons."

Ibn Hajar al-`Asqalânî in his book compiling the biographies of the notable people of the 8th century A.H., mentions one of these people: "His mental state deteriorated and he began making exorbitant claims such as seeing Allah, ascending into Heaven, and having Allah speak to him and inform him that he is the Mahdî."

CHAPTER THREE
Some General Observations

We have already presented a selection of the hadîth to be found on the Mahdî. We have also discussed a number of historical events that were directly related to this issue. Now, in closing, we shall offer some observations about what we have presented.

1st Observation:

We can easily observe that overwhelming despair causes people to look for an escape. Even if the solution is only imaginary, it gives them something to cling to and focus on in the face of their great failures and dashed hopes. This is the reason we find the Mahdism so prevalent among the Shî`ah. They had always been a minority and for the most part, political power rested in the hands of Ahl al-Sunnah. They felt alienated and excluded. Their leaders were far away from the centers of influence and decision making, so they substituted for these shortcomings by providing their followers with concepts that would protect their spirits and fortify their resolve.

This might have been something purely psychological, for though it may have been a deliberate ploy for some, others may have been so enthralled with these ideas that they actually believed them and then spread them to others with genuine conviction. Other people would then be ready to accept such ideas being expressed with such obvious earnest, honesty, and sincerity. They would also inherit their enthusiasm.

Mahdism provided an outlet for the Shî`ah who had no opportunity to acquire political power. They instigated many revolts, but these were all failures. A discussion of these revolts and their outcomes can be found in al-Asfahânî's book *Maqâtil al-Tâlibîn*.

Likewise, some people from Ahl al-Sunnah, on occasions when circumstances brought them to despair, took these ideas as a means of escape. When the Spanish expelled the Muslims from Spain, some Muslims resorted to claiming that the Mahdî had appeared. They waited for him expectantly, believing that when he came, he would lead them to victory against the Spanish.

The same can be said for some of the Muslims in the Caucasus who believed that Sheikh Mansûr, who led one of the liberation movements shortly before the time of Sheikh Shâmil, would return again and lead the *jihâd.*

The Kurds are a people who without doubt have gone through bitter suffering in many countries and throughout their history, with the historical exception of Salâh al-Dîn al-Ayyûbî and his descendants. As a consequence, many Kurds have held the belief that one of their leaders, Hasan b. `Alî, was going to return.

Feelings of frustration might come after a failure in some major undertaking or in the failure of the hopes connected with it. This could be a war effort or some other movement on which people pin their hopes and look towards as a way out of their desperation. When such efforts fail and their hopes are dashed to the ground, they become demoralized and fall into despair. They can find an escape in waiting for someone.

It is best for the Muslim nation not to pin its hopes on a specific undertaking. The area of Islamic work is far broader than to be confined to one enterprise or another. If some efforts fail, others will succeed. In this way, people's hearts can stay clear of debilitating frustration and despair. Defeat, failure, and frustration provide the ideal environment for Mahdist ideas to proliferate, especially among those who do not possess a positive plan of action that can fulfill them and channel their energies.

Despair often leads a person to believe that work is pointless and that the solutions to the problems they are facing are far beyond the reach of human effort. They see no way out aside from divine intervention of a miraculous nature, intervention that comes in the form of the Mahdî sent to them as divine assistance to inflict heavy casualties upon their enemies and visit them with destruction. He will unite the Muslims and dispel their differences.

When we embrace such ideas, we excuse ourselves from engaging in any serious or fruitful work. We become complacent while we wait for the Mahdî. Such feelings, in my opinion, stem from a combination of two afflictions:

The first is a defeatist attitude that can affect a group of people or even an entire nation when the hopes that they had vested in something specific evaporate. This is why, whenever a "Mahdî" dies, the people transfer their hopes to another or claim that he did not die or that he will one day return.

The second affliction is a longing for radical and total change and dissatisfaction with anything gradual. This is a failure to take into consideration the divine order in Creation. It is also a failure to recognize the value of gradual or partial reform. Such people dream that all of the iniquity that prevails around the world will just be swept away in the blink of an eye. Yes, we must believe that Allah has the power to change whatever He wills.

In the blink of an eye, before it can open again,
Allah changes one situation into another.

However, Allah has established a natural order for the change and reform that He has ordered us to work towards. This is why Allah says:

"Allah will not change the condition of a people until they change what is within themselves." [*Sûrah al-Ra`d*: 11]

There are those who dream of a universal solution to bring their difficulties to an end. Their problem is that they want all of this to happen within their lifetimes. The idea of planting a seedling that they and their children after them will nurture while they toil and wait for the results is something that stretches their determination beyond its limits. They are not waiting for the fruits of their own efforts and endeavors, but for something that requires no effort from them except to wait and dream.

It can be observed that people who engage in productive work like providing aid to others, teaching, calling people to Islam, and effecting reform - people who have projects, objectives, and activities that focus their attentions, energies, and hopes - are unmoved by Mahdist ideas. Such ideas have no appeal to them, even if they are themselves simple people. This is because the productive work that they engage in fulfills their lives and provides them with satisfaction. They do not need a mental crutch to support them. If one day such a person does arrive, they would readily join with the others in supporting him. All the same, they do not depend upon it happening, nor do they suspend their efforts waiting for it to happen.

As for those who pin their hopes on some distant, unattainable objective while at the same time make no effort to bring it any closer to realization but just sit around and wait, such people often look upon the efforts of others with derision. They ask: "What do you think you can do? Can you turn back the raging winds or the floodwaters with your puny little hands?" Such people see nothing as a solution except for radical and total change, and such change will only come at the hands of the Awaited One.

This is why most Mahdist claims throughout history have come about in an atmosphere of tension and crisis and in times of social or political upheaval. All such Mahdist movements took place at times when people, especially the youth, felt trapped, when they could see no way out and no light at the end of the tunnel. They found no recourse but to turn to these ideas.

We must also observe that Mahdism throughout history had almost invariably been associated with the Shî`ah, whereas today we see a startling reversal of this trend. The Shî`ah, whose whole history has been one of expectation and waiting - the very Shî`ah who had produced dozens of Mahdîs, and claimed that the Friday prayer, jihâd, and many other works were not valid until the Mahdî arrives - have now learned their lesson and they have reformed their ideas about awaiting the Mahdî. They have not discarded the idea. The vast majority of them still believe in the Awaited Mahdî, but they have found alternatives to waiting. They have begun to work, plan, and achieve results. Because of this change, they have established nations for themselves. They have formed political parties and organizations. Their media operations and their activities are unparalleled today. At the same time, Ahl al-Sunnah has begun to drone on about the Mahdî and how they wait for him in anticipation, speculating about who he is.

This is a very strange reversal in thought. The youth of Ahl al-Sunnah should stop and consider that they are putting themselves into a very difficult situation. They are heading for the very situation from which others had to bring themselves out. Nothing good can be said about this trend, especially after history has shown us how dangerous and debilitating it is.

2nd Observation:

There are two types of people who claim to be the Mahdî. The first type is the person who knows that he is lying. He is out to deceive people, turn them into his followers, them exploit them. If we look at the Fatimid state, we see that it was established on the basis of such a claim. The same can be said for the Almohads, the dynasty founded by the "Mahdî" Ibn Tûmart. These people raised the Mahdist banner for political ends and material gain, and they achieved what they had aspired to. Other claimants who had the same goals were not so fortunate.

The second type of person who comes with this claim is confused and imagines that he actually is the Mahdî. Such people are afflicted, as Ibn Hajar puts it with: "a deteriorated mental state." This situation is well understood by contemporary Psychology. There are people who become disturbed or have a split personality. Some people claim to be Jesus or the Mahdî or even someone greater than that.

3rd Observation:

Overemphasizing an issue is a form of deviance, even when dealing with a legitimate issue. As a case in point, consider the appointment of an imâm to lead the Muslims. There is no dispute about this principle, except for the unusual opinion held by al-Asamm. As for the rest of the Muslims - and all of Ahl al-Sunnah without exception - appointing an imâm is seen as a religious requirement and a necessity.

The Shî`ah, however, go overboard on this issue, making it the demarcation line between them and everybody else. They have built upon it an imposing ideological edifice. When you read their books and consider their principles and beliefs, it seems as if the Earth and

the entire universe were created only for the office of the imam, specifically the imamate of `Alî b. Abî Tâlib and his descendants. They make it seem as if these imâms are the ones who sustain all of existence, and that the life of the Hereafter emanates from them and is for them. They are depicted as the only true leadership for the people and the only source of reform for humanity. The protection of the faith is only through them. There are many other causative relationship that they tie to their imâms, besides those that we have mentioned, and all these claims are made without any evidence to support them.

Ahl al-Sunnah should grasp this fact that overemphasizing any issue can be a form of deviance. Yes, you must believe in a matter that is legitimate, but you must likewise give it its legitimate emphasis, neither blowing it out of proportion nor neglecting it. This principle applies to the question of the Mahdî. Some people go so far as to deny the hadîth about the Mahdî altogether. Often they do this because of the great many ways the idea of the Mahdî has been abused throughout history, as if denying his existence will put and end to the problem. Sometimes, though, the reason for their denial is a lack of knowledge about the Sunnah. This is one extreme. Then there are those who embrace the idea of Mahdism with such force and excessive zeal that it consumes them. They are as much in error as those who reject the Mahdî altogether.

The same can be said for any other issue, even the issue of worship. If someone goes to an extreme in his fear of Allah, he can wind up falling into the errors of the Khârijîs.[1] On the other hand, excessive hope for Allah's forgiveness can lead one into the mistakes of the Murji'ah.[2] Excessive love can lead to the errors of the Sufis. This is true for all legitimate Islamic principles. We must believe in them and give them their proper weight, neither exaggerating their importance nor neglecting them. This is a very important concept.

This is part of the "just balance" that is given special mention in the Qur'ân. Allah says: "We have made you a nation justly balanced." [*Sûrah al-Baqarah*: 143]

This just balance is to have moderation by neither going to extremes in these matters nor shunning them altogether. When we consider the questions about which the Muslims differ, whether we are talking about the Muslims in general or the Islamic workers and organizations in particular, we often see that the cause of such disagreement is their adopting one extreme position or another. One group goes to extremes on the issue of Islamic government, so much so that they accuse Muslim governments of unbelief, as well as those scholars and citizens who are contented with these governments. Then there are others who neglect this same issue and belittle its importance, claiming without any proof from Allah that people are free to govern themselves by any law and political system they see fit. These people are as excessive in their neglect of these issues as those others are in promoting them.

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[1] An early Islamic sect that declared anyone who commits a major sin to be an unbeliever, damned for eternity.

[2] Another early Islamic sect that declared belief sufficient for salvation and considered deeds, sinful or otherwise, of no consequence.

Then there is the moderation that gives every question its legitimate weight and its due consideration, eschewing all extremes. Allah says: “Verily, for all things Allah has appointed a due proportion.” [*Sûrah al-Talâq*: 3]

There is no escaping the fact that overemphasizing one matter always means neglecting another of equal, if not greater, importance.

4th Observation:

Islam provides a powerful alternative to waiting, and those who are engrossed in the question of the Mahdî and his expected appearance generally fail to take notice of it. This is the principle of renewal found in the hadîth related by Abû Hurayrah: “Allah sends to this nation at the beginning of each century those who renew the religion.” [*Sunan Abî Dâwûd* (4291)]

This is an authentic hadîth that has enjoyed widespread acceptance among Muslims. The issue of renewal is a legitimate Islamic concept, and it has been acted upon by the leading scholars. Abû Bakr engaged in it after the death of the Prophet (peace be upon him) by bringing the people back to the truth and fighting the apostates. `Umar b. `Abd al-`Azîz engaged in it in his reform of the Umayyads. Al-Shâfi`î, Ahmad and other scholars carried out this effort throughout the ages. Each one of these people carried out renewal in his area of efficacy.

This is the issue that can actually reform the circumstances of the people and even inspire them to participate in their own reform. The reason for this is that renewal is not something that awaits the arrival of any individual like the Mahdî; it is the duty of every Muslim. Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) said: “those who renew the religion.” This is a general statement, not indicative of any particular individual or group. It embraces numerous people working in different areas of life. Who can single-handedly renew all aspects of Islam which embraces so many aspects of life, including education, work, worship, economics, and the media? This cannot be achieved by any one individual or even a group of individuals. Such sweeping renewal requires a vast number of people.

Even so, the Muslim nation will always require more reform and continued renewal. This is why Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) mentioned the divinely supported group that would remain steadfast on Allah's command and would neither be harmed by those who would forsake them nor by those who would go against them until the coming of Allah's decree. The concern of this group is reform and renewal. Some of them engage in education, some economic reform, some in Islamic work, others in relief efforts. We need to take our nation, its youth, its organizations, and its diverse peoples, out of the despair in which they dwell. This is a responsibility that we all share.

CONCLUSION

I wish to conclude with four points:

1. We must foster dialogue about the major issues facing the Muslims today. We must develop in our youth and our men the ability to listen. This is especially true for our leaders, both intellectual and political. For when people know that they are being listened to, it removes some of the discontent in their hearts. It opens up avenues for understanding, negotiation, and exchange. This preserves the unity of the Muslims and the energies of the youth. It directs their energies to the important task of confronting the real dangers surrounding them.

2. We must encourage our intellectual institutions to engage in Islamic work, education, and relief. We must encourage them to employ the media. Our charitable organizations must be supported and promoted as well, along with all other charitable efforts. We have to remove the despair and frustration that the Muslims are suffering from, because despair produces nothing. It can only bring about harm by placing people in a defeatist mindset.

3. We must provide opportunities for our young Muslims to live decent, respectable lives. We must provide this for our families and our society at large. Poverty and unemployment turn people into the fuel for any deviant ideology that comes along.

4. We must safeguard the Islamic nation from the vicissitudes of deviant though and moral depravity. There can be no doubt that these factors have the power to incite a reaction with grave negative consequences. We have begun to see in the Arab media and on the Internet and chat sites people maligning Allah and denouncing His Glory and Greatness. They are likewise slandering Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him), deprecating that which the Muslims hold sacred, and profaning the symbols of Islam. We must permit dialogue, but this dialogue must stay within the bounds of what is Islamically permitted. We must not give those who are sick and depraved and morally weak the opportunity to do abuse Islam in such an obscene and vulgar manner, because this can sometimes give birth to violent and extraordinary reactions. It is imperative for us to safeguard the Muslims from the deviant and filthy ideas and mores that the media, through the television, the Internet, and other means at their disposal, are pumping into our Muslim societies. We must put forth a major effort to do this.

I ask Allah to give strength to Islam and the Muslims and to instill weakness in those who oppose Islam. May Allah assist the Muslims everywhere and protect them from the evil of the wicked and the plots of the devious as long as there is day and night. May Allah help us to say righteous words and perform righteous deeds. Verily, He is capable of all things. And may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon our Prophet Muhammad and upon all of his family and Companions.